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ACTS  
OF  
NAMING

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THE  
FAMILY PLOT  
IN FICTION

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*Michael Ragussis*

## *Acts of Naming*

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## THE FAMILY PLOT IN FICTION

*Michael Ragussis*

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*To my mother  
and to my son*

Where thou goest, Daniel, I shall go. Is it not begun?  
Have I not breathed my soul into you? We shall live  
together.

GEORGE ELIOT, *Daniel Deronda*

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## *Acts of Naming*

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# Introduction:

## In the Name of the Child

The word ["name"] seems to be a compressed sentence signifying that the object for which there is a search, is a name.

PLATO, *Cratylus*

I take as my subject in the following pages those acts in fiction that have as their object a name. To bestow, find, reveal, or earn a name; to take away, hide, or prohibit a name; to slander and stain or protect and serve a name—I will argue that such acts are the means and ends of the characters in fiction, and as such lay bare a novel's deepest levels of plot.

I have begun with a quotation from Plato because the *Cratylus* is generally acknowledged as the point of departure for the study of naming. This fact alone may serve to remind us that from the beginning the question of names proceeds under the aegis of philosophy. How, then, do the acts of naming that I have enumerated become the subject of fiction? At what point and in what way does fiction take over the concept of the name as the end of a search—a search that is typically characterized as the subject of a specifically philosophic inquiry? To begin to answer this question, let us look at the novelist pondering the question of names through the eyes of the philosopher. While writing *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy recorded his reaction to Plato's dialogue in the following words: "After reading Plato's 'Cratylus': A very good way of looking at things would be to regard everything as having an actual or false name, and an intrinsic or true name, to ascertain which all endeavor should be made. . . . The fact is that nearly all things are falsely, or rather inadequately, named."<sup>1</sup> Does Hardy's approving gloss on Plato's text enter the novel that he is writing at the time? Beginning with the revelation that things are inadequately named, Hardy puts before us in *Tess* the further problem that we may not know how to name persons at all. Hardy bases

the tragedy of *Tess* in those acts of naming that fix the identity of people through false names, and in this way the general inadequacy of the names for *things* becomes specified as the failure to know how to name *persons*. In fact, when we recall “the philosopher’s regard” with which Angel inspects Tess, and the ways in which he insists on naming her, we begin to realize that Hardy exposes in *Tess* the tragic consequences of applying to persons the philosophic method of naming things. Despite its persistent search for the right name, philosophy offers us no genuine model for naming people. Therefore, like Hardy in this initial example, the novelist typically reimagines philosophy’s search for the names of things. From the eighteenth century to the present, the novel in England and America develops as a coherent tradition in search of the way to name persons. In crossing the border from philosophy’s names for things to people’s names for each other, fiction constitutes itself as that field of discourse which defines what it is to be “human”—the final name toward which fiction directs its search.

I have begun with the *Cratylus* for a second reason. It reemerges as a fundamental document during the Enlightenment when philosophy rediscovers naming as a crucial subject of inquiry—and when the novel emerges as a genre by organizing its plots around acts of naming, in response to the view of names held by such a philosopher as Locke. On this first point, scholars have recently argued for a remarkable proximity between Plato and Locke: “It might be no exaggeration to claim that when Locke’s *Essay* first appeared it constituted the most detailed investigation of semantic theory in western philosophy since Plato’s *Cratylus*.”<sup>2</sup> I wish to emphasize the way in which these two texts concentrate philosophic inquiry on the name as the central locus of meaning. Locke attempts to put an end to the *Cratylus*’s seminal debate over whether names are conventional or natural when he issues his influential dictum that while names are often believed to stand for the reality of things, they “signify nothing but the Ideas, that are in the Mind of the Speaker.”<sup>3</sup> He argues for the conventional nature of names by explaining the way in which we come to have general terms when all things are particular: communication would simply be impossible if everything had its own name. Therefore, Locke argues, language makes a crucial compromise from the start: it creates the convenient fiction of general names—those names that are Locke’s subject in the third book of his *Essay*. Hobbes anticipates this crucial moment in English nominalist philosophy when he exposes the peculiarity of names and the reason we should mistrust them: “There being nothing in the world universal but names, for the things named are every one of them individual and singular.”<sup>4</sup>

Locke's critique does not simply dismiss the significance of names. English Enlightenment philosophy, precisely insofar as it adopts the notion of conventional names, ultimately refashions the sign as the crucial tool of science. If names are man-made, arbitrary signs, they have the capacity to become the perfect instrument of knowledge. As Hobbes puts it, "in the right definition of names lies the first use of speech, which is the acquisition of science"; and again, "By the advantage of *names* it is that we are capable of *science*."<sup>5</sup> Hence the classificatory systems of the Enlightenment and the development of the science of taxonomy. By seeking the name as the means whereby science can classify and reveal all things in perfect clarity and order, English empiricism fulfills the Platonic notion that defines the name as the object of a search.

But what about proper names? They are lost in a parenthetical aside: "all (except proper) Names are general"<sup>6</sup>—that is, lost in philosophy on its way to becoming science. But they are rescued and adopted by a rival discourse, the new genre of literature that arises in the same period, as if to show us that the names we seek are not simply those that will name things.

The difference between naming in philosophy and in fiction may be tentatively summarized along the following lines. From the point of view of the novel, the mistake in the *Cratylus* is that it draws no essential distinction between the names of things and the names of persons; when Socrates, in the first part of his argument, defends the natural meaning of names, he employs a method of etymological analysis that makes all names the same, so that, for example, "air" is etymologically deciphered as "the element which raises things from the earth," while in a similar vein "Agamemnon" is deciphered as "admirable for remaining."<sup>7</sup> Again from the point of view of the novel, the mistake in Locke's *Essay* (and the philosophic tradition that derives from it) is that it neglects not simply this distinction but the entire issue of proper names. In short, philosophy seeks general names, for things and ideas, while fiction seeks proper names, for individual persons.<sup>8</sup>

To understand more precisely why fiction historically takes as its field of interest the naming of persons, we must recognize a profound anomaly in Enlightenment culture: the Enlightenment is at once the epoch of the general name and the individual person. Historians typically point to the emergence of the individual during the Enlightenment, and in fiction this is of course the epoch of the orphan, the bastard, the criminal, the shipwrecked—or outcast—self. From one angle, such a view is in fact supported in the language philosophy of the time. When, for example, Locke moves the locus of meaning in naming from the thing itself to the



mind of the speaker, he signals that era of subjectivity that we equate with the novel, both as a genre of private consumption and as a genre whose theme is the individual self. But the program Locke initiates for philosophy—the demystification of names so they can become the tool of science—neglects the naming of persons. One could even argue that the perfection of a scientific discourse of general names becomes philosophy's protection against the threat of subjectivism. In this light philosophy's program of general names does not simply neglect proper names. It is meant to disenfranchise and, ideally, to erase the individual and the name for the individual, the proper name. The naming of the individual, then, was necessarily excluded from the enterprise by which philosophy used general names to order all things into classificatory systems.

The novel's exploration of the naming of persons does not develop simply in response to a gap in philosophical discourse. It would be more accurate to say that the novel responds to a critical disjunction in Enlightenment culture: the neglect of the proper name within Enlightenment philosophy versus the new value of the proper name within the domain of the eighteenth-century family. During the eighteenth century in England significant changes occurred in family life that gave a new prominence to the child's name. For example, the omission from genealogies of the names of short-lived infants drops significantly between the sixteenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries, and the practice of giving a newborn infant the same first name as an elder deceased sibling, common in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, similarly drops sharply by the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Such changes, of course, signal the growing belief in the uniqueness of the individual, in the belief that one child cannot simply replace another. I wish to emphasize the way in which the child emerges during the Enlightenment as the carrier of the proper name, and the way in which in the same epoch the novel arises to record and explore the urgency of the child's role. It is the child who takes the question of naming out of the hands of the philosopher and turns it over to the novelist.

The naming of the child within the domain of the family by no means presents the novelist with an entirely successful model for the naming of persons. To the contrary, it is the family's system of naming that produces the immediate crisis to which fiction responds with what I will call naming plots. Precisely insofar as the child is recognized as an individual, he or she arrives on the scene as a challenge to the family's attempt to fix the child's identity through naming.<sup>10</sup> To understand how this happens, we must realize first that the family name constitutes something like the general name in philosophy or the species name in natural science.

Socrates tells us in the *Cratylus* that “the offspring of every kind, in the regular course of nature, is like the parent, and must therefore have the same name” (394a). But in his etymological analysis in proof of the natural meanings of the name, only the names of human beings (as opposed to those of things, or ideas, or gods) are “apt to be deceptive because they are often called after ancestors with whose name . . . they may have no business; and they are the expression of a wish . . .” (397b). One could argue that philosophy throws up its hands in frustration at human names because the child, unlike the thing or the idea, is potentially powerful enough to resist the name. The child enters the naming system as the unpredictable, the unfixable, the power that threatens to resist our will or wish. The child is always potentially the deviant, the break in the chain, the hole in history, for the philosopher as well as for the family. For this reason the family name functions to classify—and thereby nullify—the individual, while the proper name exerts the power of a magical wish which expresses the will of the family. No names better illustrate this latter point than those which Puritan parents commonly gave: “Roger Clapp’s children were named Experience, Waitstill, Preserved, Hopedstill, Wait, Thanks, Desire, Unite and Supply. Other appellations included Rich Grace, More Mercy, Relieve, Believe, Reform, Deliverance and Strange.”<sup>11</sup> Both the family name and the proper name form part of a system whose function is to determine and fix the child’s identity, to make the child serve the will of the family.

The special irony of Enlightenment culture, then, makes the naming systems of the philosopher and the family a cooperative effort: the neglect of the proper name in favor of the general name in philosophy becomes, within the family, the use of the proper name to serve the family name. It is in this sense that the naming plots of fiction take as their broadest setting the philosophical inquiry into names, and as their most immediate setting the family’s practices of naming. And it is especially within the domain of the family that we see the way in which the procedures of personal naming charge the child with an extraordinary weight of meaning. We begin to realize that what is at stake in the naming process is no less than an act of possession. In a ceremony like baptism, for example, the giving of a name is just such an act: “The naming of a person had the meaning of attaching the baptized to this person so that the baptized belonged to him. This is confirmed by exegesis; for the consequence and the effect of baptism ‘in the name’ of Christ may be gathered from a consideration of Paul’s assertion, ‘you belong to Christ.’”<sup>12</sup>

In most cultures one of the primary functions of human names is to

order the flux of the generations by bringing the new individual inside the cultural system. In our culture this is managed through the family name, and sometimes extends to giving the child even the proper name of the father (as in *Pierre*), thereby making the proper name a family name. Lévi-Strauss argues that there is no such thing as a proper name because all naming is at bottom classifying, a way of placing the individual in a classificatory order. And this is certainly true of such names as Pierre Glendinning IV, or of such Puritan names as Waitstill or Believe. But whereas Lévi-Strauss sees such a process unequivocally as a positive integration of the individual into the community, the novel typically dramatizes the child as the victim of such a system, lost in any number of family or class names.

Lévi-Strauss tries to disprove the significance and value of proper names by showing that even when such names do exist, they occupy an inferior position in the naming system: "It is only children who overtly bear their names, either because they are too young to be structurally qualified by the family and social system or because the means of qualification have, for the time being, been suspended in favour of their parents. Proper names thus undergo a truly logical devaluation. They are the mark of being 'unclassified.'"<sup>13</sup> Despite his claim that anthropology is a rival discipline to philosophy (not unlike my claim for fiction), Lévi-Strauss's view of naming sounds like that of an Enlightenment philosopher: the individual must be classified—a contradiction in terms that kinship-based societies solve by devaluing the status of the individual, and that Western culture, especially from the eighteenth century on, makes the subject of a tragic vision. Isn't the dark suggestion of Hardy's title not that Tess of the d'Urbervilles is in possession of a family name (what Lévi-Strauss would claim is the preferred position), but just the opposite—that Tess is tragically possessed in the name of the family?

The family's attempt to fix identity through the name has its parallel in the critic's most characteristic approach to names in fiction. The critic elucidates character through the name, sometimes even making an equation between name and person that fixes character once and for all. Such a method extends Cratylus's argument to the names of persons in fiction: the name designates character ("Agamemnon" means "admirable for remaining"). In this context the typical analysis of names in fiction extends an already long line of etymological analysis of personal names, from the "speaking names" in the *Iliad* (with Hector as "the shielder," for example), to the Old Testament practice, "As his name is, so is he" (I Sam. 25:25), to the passage in Matthew in which the exegesis of the name Peter authenticates the natural meaning of names. Such examples

support a long tradition that lasts at least through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.<sup>14</sup> And one could, of course, supply ample cases of telling names in English and American fiction (Lovelace and Chillingworth and Angel Clare). From Dickens the examples would be legion (Pumblechook and Gradgrind, Boythorn and Skimpole, and so on).

Science is the great demystifier of such a view. As part of its claim that names are conventional, science appeals to the idea of the natural name only to deflate it, and we find especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, in philosophy, psychology, and anthropology, a demystification of what is seen as the savage or neurotic view of the animism of names.<sup>15</sup> At the same time it is not difficult to find this idea of the natural name haunting even the modern mind. After all his arguments against the verifiability of the magic power of the name, Jung, for example, still finds a certain power in the "compulsion of the name":

Herr Gross (Mr. Grand) suffers from delusions of grandeur, Herr Kleiner (Mr. Small) has an inferiority complex. The Altmann sisters marry men twenty years older than themselves. Herr Feist (Mr. Stout) is the Food Minister, Herr Rosstauchsher (Mr. Horsetrader) is a lawyer, Herr Kalberer (Mr. Calver) is an obstetrician, Herr Freud (joy) champions the pleasure principle, Herr Adler (eagle) the will-to-power, Herr Jung (young) the idea of rebirth, and so on. Are these the whimsicalities of chance, or the suggestive effects of the name, as Stekel seems to suggest, or are they "meaningful coincidences"?<sup>16</sup>

While acknowledging that our imaginations find the idea of the natural name irresistible at some level, can we in fact say that fiction is predicated upon a theory of natural names—the kind of theory that lies at the heart of the critic's equation between person and name? Fiction undermines such a theory by exposing the way in which it comes dangerously close to reducing people to things, to assigning a "meaning" to a person and thereby neglecting what I take to be the tacit goal of the novel—the telling of a complicated and varied individual life story. The farthest extreme of the theory of the natural name would require of a character the predictable reenactment over and over of a central trait—what Dickens's minor characters often produce, in the background of the primary action. Reducing a major character to the name he or she bears would shrink the entire plot of a novel to a simple, quasi-scientific verification, in deeds, of what the name means. The view that equates name and person, then, offers little possibility for expansion in fiction, and has perhaps its broadest usefulness in the fatalistic plot in which the name shapes the destiny of the character. Such an idea does enter the novel at its earliest stages, but as a comic hobgoblin, as one of the prime Shandy-

isms in *Tristram Shandy*. Mr. Shandy thinks “a great deal more depended than what superficial minds were capable of conceiving” on “the choice and imposition of Christian names,” that, in fact, “there was a strange kind of magick bias, which good or bad names, as he called them, irresistibly impressed upon our characters and conduct”: “*Andrew* was something like a negative quantity in Algebra with him;—’twas worse, he said, than nothing:—*William* stood pretty high:—*Numps* again was low with him:—and *Nick*, he said, was the DEVIL. But, of all the names in the universe, he had the most unconquerable aversion for TRISTRAM.”<sup>17</sup> Mr. Shandy’s view stands behind one of the crucial errors that characters commit inside the novels I will be examining—that is, to reduce another human being to a name, to a single and fixed value.

The special feature of fiction that warns us most emphatically against such a view bestows several names on a single person. This persistent renaming problematizes the idea that a single name fixes a character’s meaning, and begins to suggest how entire plots are organized around a series of renamings. In *The Member of the Wedding*, for example, the title character is alternately named Frankie, F. Jasmine, and Frances, so that each of the three parts of McCullers’s novel opens with a paragraph in which the narrator names the central character differently, while the title names her again. That a character bears many names suggests that an individual’s history requires a set of names, or a series of renamings that signal the different stages of a life story or fictional plot. The “true” name, then, often functions as a series of names, a composite name, as if, instead of shedding one name after another as Natty Bumppo does in Cooper’s novels, one must take them all, to have one’s history as Nathaniel (or Natty) Bumppo Straight-Tongue Pigeon Lap-ear Deerslayer Hawkeye. The extraordinary number of names a single character lives through allows us to revise Plato’s remark by pushing it to the limit: fiction shows us that for persons the name is what is always sought and never (or at least rarely) found. The plots of fiction are rarely resolved through the successful completion of a search for the single name, though sometimes a plot seems designed along such lines.

The name in fiction, then, does not fix identity and hold it still. Quite the contrary, the name is a significant variable throughout the text, perpetually rewritten and recharged with varying meanings. Who, for example, is Harriot Lucas? Miss Laetitia Beaumont? Rachel Clark? Mrs. Dorothy Salcomb? Mrs. Mary Atkin? Each is a name that Clarissa Harlowe invents for herself at different points in her story. Who is George Jackson? Sarah Williams? George Peters? And the last, and perhaps most teasing clue: who is Tom Sawyer? Huck, in *The Adven-*

tures of *Huckleberry Finn*. We will see that the characters in such novels as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Bleak House*, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* bear a similarly elaborate list of names, but, unlike Clarissa and Huck, not by their own choice—such names are assigned to them by others—while Natty Bumppo marks the different stages of his life by a series of different names in a plot where the name is not arbitrarily invented by oneself or another, but is earned through deeds. In such cases the single name hides within it a cluster of other names.

On the title page such names as Clarissa or Deerslayer or Huckleberry Finn appear single and clear, as if a fixed certainty, but in fact they invite us into the text of fiction, where the title-name is made a literary intertext (as in *Ulysses* or *Absalom, Absalom!* or in Durrell's *Justine*, in which the author's epigraph is a quotation from Sade's *Justine*); or where the title-name is the false or fictitious name that the course of the plot must expose and replace (as in *Tom Jones* or *Oliver Twist*); or where the title-name openly admits the variability of names (as in *The Unnamable*, in which no name becomes a special kind of name).

Such examples of the variable name stand behind my claim that the most fruitful approach to names in fiction is not the exegesis of a single name, the so-called proper name. Instead, I wish to allow the different names a character bears to write up a life story, and to understand the way in which various acts of naming organize entire plots.

While fiction recharges with power the names of people, it does so most profoundly by claiming not that names are natural or that destinies are shaped by a powerful name, but that people shape destinies—others' and their own—by the immense power they accord to names. Fiction shows us that we so value names that they become the center of both symbolic and literal acts of recognition, abandonment, rape, suicide, and murder. Even characters whose names do reveal a side of their nature (Lovelace or Chillingworth or Angel Clare) are far more deeply portrayed by the complicated acts of naming they perform. In this light, the name functions most profoundly in fiction not as a static standard-bearer that reveals character from the beginning, but as the center of a matrix of action, at the center of the plots of fiction.

I have been claiming that fiction represents the naming of persons through a complicated series of acts of naming, or a naming plot. In this way fiction upsets the family's (and the critic's) attempt to fix the identity of a character (especially a child) through a key name. When this attempt fails, the family retaliates by withholding the name instead of bestowing it. The child who fails to be equal to the family name becomes dispossessed of that name. I am thinking, for example, of the way in which

children are literally disinherited, so that Pierre discovers that there is not the "least mention of his own name" in his mother's will.<sup>18</sup> Mrs. Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* uses a special method of withholding the name: as part of her pride in her own name, she divides her children into Compsons, or "strangers" (all but Jason), and Bascombs (she tells Jason, "you are a Bascomb, despite your name"). At its farthest reaches such a system literally becomes a kind of unnamings. Mrs. Compson prohibits the use of her daughter's name within the household, and even Caddy's own daughter is kept from hearing the unspoken name Caddy: "She must never even learn that name." In a similar vein, she bestows her brother's name on her son ("Maury"), but then takes it away to keep the stigma of the child's idiocy from her own family, finally bestowing on him the biblical name that publishes her own sorrow and suffering: "Benjamin the child of mine old age bellowing."<sup>19</sup> Even withholding a name (a kind of orphaning by unnamings that can occur inside the family) may add to the multiplication and variability of the names a character bears (as in Maury/Benjy, or Jason Compson/Jason Bascomb).

The refusal to allow the child the proper name or the family name has its broadest variation in not allowing the child the species name. In this way the adult world attempts to turn to its own advantage the unknown nature of the child. By withholding the name "human" from the child, the adult makes the child a useful test case. The child is imagined on a series of borders, providing the adult with a relatively safe access to primitivism, bestiality, madness, the supernatural, and so on. The child who is given the proper name of "Strange" signifies this potential function. In eighteenth-century America "Infants . . . were sometimes referred to as 'strangers,' not immediately accepted as full-fledged human beings."<sup>20</sup> The child becomes the questionable subject of endless debate in a world of adult human beings. In short, the child takes up his value as "The Young Experiment," as he is named by his father in Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*.

During the Enlightenment the child's usefulness in scientific experiments is fueled by the remarkable cases of the wild children, captured and incarcerated, studied and tested and analyzed—in short, made the object of naming and classifying. In their preoccupation with the question of human nature, eighteenth-century philosophers used the child as an instrument to philosophize about the borders along which to position human beings, monsters, and wild men (a new species that Linnaeus christened *homo ferus*). At the end of the eighteenth century, in the case of the Boy of Aveyron, for example, we see that the child has his significance and value as a sign in what I am calling, for the novel, a naming plot.

Once captured, the nameless child is first called "Joseph," then renamed "Victor," and while the philosophers and scientists are debating whether to classify him as an "idiot" or "*homo ferus*," most people know him as nothing but the "Savage," and even upon his death no one knows his family name (though most assume that for the "Savage" there is no such thing).<sup>21</sup>

It is no accident that a similar example occurs in Enlightenment philosophy in the crucial text on naming that we have been consulting. In Locke's *Essay* the problem of how to classify human beings (not how to name individual persons) is crystallized in the case of a child whose identity is questionable to those in charge of naming him:

When the Abbot of St. Martin . . . was born, he had so little the Figure of a Man, that it bespoke him rather a Monster. 'Twas for some time under deliberation, whether he should be baptized or no. However, he was baptized and declared a Man provisionally [till time should show what he would prove]. Nature had moulded him so untowardly, that he was called all his Life the Abbot Malotur, i.e. Ill Shaped.<sup>22</sup>

Locke uses this example to expose the pure conventionality of names, to show that for us it is not nature that declares what a man is, but our own verbal classificatory systems—in this case, a series of definitions that we demand of anyone who wishes to be known by the name "man": "to be of any Species, and to have a right to the name of that Species, is all one. As for Example, to be a *Man*, or of the Species *Man*, and to have the right to the name *Man*, is the same thing."<sup>23</sup> Here we can begin to imagine the farthest reaches of the power of the (species) name, and the way in which human beings are divided between those who rule by naming and those who are ruled by being named.<sup>24</sup>

These cases of the monster-man (the Abbot Malotur) and the "man-plant"<sup>25</sup> (the Wild Boy of Aveyron) do not take us very far afield from the novel. In the novels we will be looking at, one could even say that each character (but especially the child) is only provisionally worthy of being named human,<sup>26</sup> and that the name "human child" is not a harmless tautology but a classification in need of proof. In this light Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a literalization of the psychological and political issues raised by such species names as "human" and "monster," dramatized significantly through the familial roles of parent and child—where, one might add, both class names are problematized in the course of the plot, as both "creatures" live beyond their names at significant moments in their histories (the filthy progeny is, of course, never granted a proper name). In such ways *Frankenstein* exposes the problem of the child's ontological status by exaggerating the question that asks if the child is



human, a question that especially tags the bastard or outcast child. In *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, the mother herself "could not help questioning, at such moments, whether Pearl was a human child," as if the mother had "evoked a spirit . . . in the process of conjuration," while in *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner repeats Hawthorne's theme: "as if he had not been human born but instead created without agency of man or agony of woman and orphaned by no human being."<sup>27</sup> The question addressed to Pearl—"What art thou?"—reverberates throughout the pages of fiction, in *Oliver Twist*, in *Pierre*, in *Tess*, in *Absalom, Absalom!* and so on. Such a question supersedes the question we ask human beings—"Who are you?"—and the difference between the two questions measures the distance the bastard or outcast child must travel in order to be called human. In knowing neither father nor mother, and in finding that others do not receive him as a human being, the monster in *Frankenstein* asks the double question of himself, unable to know what to name himself: "Was I, then, a monster. . . ?"; "Who was I? What was I?"<sup>28</sup> Such is the dehumanizing question addressed to the unknown child, the child beyond classification: "He is of no order and no place; neither of the beasts, nor of humanity," as the narrator of *Bleak House* says of Jo.<sup>29</sup>

The "plot" of the *Alice* books is shaped by the continual unnamings and renamings of this problematic figure, "a human child" (137).<sup>30</sup> And here "human" neither integrates the child into a community nor authorizes her power, for the *Alice* books subversively deanthropomorphize the world not simply by renaming it, but by reimagining who is empowered to name. In a radical move, human beings are no longer in charge of naming. The creatures of the *Alice* books are freed from the captivity of silence and assume the power of naming. In this way Alice's "fall" (8) and her persistent search for the garden rewrite Adam's fall; Alice enters an ironic Eden where the human being is not the master namer. To chart the plot of the *Alice* books is to follow the successive displacements of Alice's names. First, there is the displacement of Alice's proper name, so that Alice becomes "Mabel" (17) and then "Mary Ann" (27). Then, after attempting to name herself through simple pronominal equations—"She's *she* and I'm *I*" (16)—Alice is forced to admit, "I'm not myself" (35). Finally, Alice's species name is displaced: in countless passages the creatures seize the Adamic power to unname and rename the child. The child is seen by the flowers as no more than an inferior specimen of their own kind, and by others (and sometimes by herself) as a "thing" (70) or, worse yet, as "Nothing" (136). The Unicorn and the Lion turn the tables completely by naming Alice "Monster" (177). In this way the contour of plot moves from asking "Who are *you*?" (35) to

asking "*What* are you?" (43), the double question that I have suggested lies at the center of naming as a dehumanizing process.

In the *Alice* books the child learns the arbitrary and exorbitant power the human exercises over the nonhuman. When Alice is asked, "Are you animal—or vegetable—or mineral?" (176), the game by which the child learns to master things through names is turned against the child herself. At the same time, the radical reversal that gives the nonhuman the power to name the human suggests an even more subversive lesson: the ways in which the adult works the same system against the child. When the child in this fantasy world is tested, catechized, and made the object of scrutiny, in order to be named and classified, identified and "labeled" (131), she undergoes precisely the procedures she undergoes every day, only her masters have become the Unicorn and the Caterpillar and Humpty Dumpty, instead of the schoolmaster and her parents and the clergyman.

In fact, the usefulness of the *Alice* books for my purposes is their parodic exaggeration of the scenes and events we will see time and again in the realistic novel. When the mock-turtle's self-(un)naming, "Once . . . I was a real Turtle" (74), mocks Alice's "I—I hardly know [who I am], Sir, just at present—at least I know who I *was*" (35), it mocks at the same time the kind of tragic dissociation of name and person we see in *Clarissa* when the heroine declares, "My name is—I don't know what my name is!" and, "my name was Clarissa Harlowe."<sup>31</sup> Alice's "I'm not myself" echoes the tragic cry repeated everywhere in Richardson's novel and crystallizes an inquiry that the novelistic tradition takes up always in the same formulation: what does it mean to be equal to oneself and one's name? And when, in the *Alice* books, the child is alternately called "a thing" and "Nothing," and when "Nobody" (170) is reified by becoming the name of a person, I recall the way in which Mrs. Glendinning in *Pierre* stigmatizes the bastard child Isabel by calling her a "thing"; or the bastard child Esther's self-naming in *Bleak House* names her as no one ("I was no one"); or Esther's father actually literalizes such a name by taking for himself the pseudonym "Nemo," or "No one." And when, in the *Alice* books, Humpty Dumpty wants to convert the name "Alice" into meaning, just as his name signifies his shape (or just as "M. Hatter" is a hatter and "W. Rabbit" is a white rabbit), I recall the move to translate the proper name or the family name into a common noun (with a slanderous signification) in *Clarissa* and *Tess*. And finally, when, in the *Alice* books, the animals turn the science of classification on the child, I recall that such a system of naming is in fact turned on human beings, and especially on the child and the woman, in the novel from *Clarissa* to *Lolita*.

In Part One of this book I present three exemplary naming plots. It would be possible to see a large number of novels as structured through these three plots. In Part Two, however, I have a different goal in mind: to study the central role of naming within the discourse by which a family constitutes itself, and thereby to understand family naming plots in relationship to the entire enterprise of fiction. In other words, in Part Two I attempt to suggest not simply that fiction organizes itself around naming plots, but that fiction is itself an act of naming that revises the way in which naming functions within the family. For this reason, each of the chapters in Part Two falls into two sections: the first formulates the subject of naming for the family, while the second formulates fiction as a revision of the family's system of naming. Only in the case of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* does this strategy break down; the profound tragedy of *Tess* will not allow the recuperation of naming under the sponsorship of fiction. Thus the silencing of Hardy's own novel writing in the 1890s may signal a deep suspicion about the procedures and the benefits of fiction generally. *Tess's* position in the novelistic tradition makes one further goal possible in Part Two: a reflection backward on the circumstances that make the daughter the best illustration of the problems of naming. In Part Three, I discuss at some length Enlightenment traditions of naming, and explore the ways in which *Lolita* can help us see the novelistic uses to which such traditions may be put. In *Lolita* and in two of the texts to which it directly alludes (*Fanny Hill* and *A la recherche du temps perdu*), I find clarified what I take to be the most potent threat that systems of naming pose to the novelistic tradition: the complete valorization of the master name undermines the narrative act by which a life story is told. The valorization of the master name simplifies the complications and variabilities of a life story by reducing a person to a meaning; to bestow a name is the means by which one becomes the author of the text of another. Nabokov shows this by making the violation of the child (especially the daughter) a moment in the larger violation that unnames and renames, and by making *Lolita* a late moment in a tradition of novels that shows (in *Clarissa*, say, and *Tess*) the way in which the (family) rape of the daughter cooperates with a profoundly insidious and inescapable system of (family) naming. Through parodic exaggeration *Lolita* brings to a new pitch the novel's exploration of the question the Red Queen asks Alice: "What do you suppose is the use of a child without any meaning?" The novelistic tradition exposes the presumptive and utterly devastating implications of such a question by ruthlessly identifying those acts of naming that appropriate a person, especially those acts of naming that define the use of a child.

## PART ONE

# THE NAMING PLOTS OF FICTION

The honour of a maid is her name, and no legacy is so rich as honesty.

SHAKESPEARE, *All's Well That Ends Well*

A man's name is not like a cloak that merely hangs around him, that may be loosened and tightened at will; it is a perfectly fitting garment. It grows over him like his very skin; one cannot scrape and scratch at it without injuring the man himself.

GOETHE, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*